FIRST AUSTRALIAN RECORD OF HOODED PITTA (*PITTA SORDIDA CUCULLATA*) WITH NOTES ON ITS DISTRIBUTION AND MIGRATION

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INTRODUCTION

On 23 January 2010 a fresh dead pitta was found by workers, under shrubs beside a footpath at the mining camp on Barrow Island, Western Australia at 20°49'36"S, 115°26'42"E. It was extremely fresh when found (eyes still fleshy) and appeared to have died that day. Several photographs were taken and it was identified as a Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*. The specimen was frozen and sent to AQIS in Karratha then sent to the Western Australian Museum on 12 February 2010. The specimen was then prepared into a study skin (registered number A37111) and its identification confirmed as a Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida cucullata* Hartlaub, 1843.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SPECIMEN

Details of the bird are as follows:

Subadult male; total length 166 mm; weight 35g (with no body or subcutaneous fat); exposed culmen 22 mm; entire culmen 25 mm; bill width 8.5 mm; bill depth 8.5 mm; wing 114 mm; tail 35 mm; tarsus 39 mm; middle toe and claw 27 mm. Iris dark brown; bill black; gape pinkish white (the gape area and orbital skin may have faded after death as photographs of live birds of similar age shows the gape area to be pale yellow and the orbital skin bluish pink to pale blue); mouth flesh; legs pinkish grey. Crown and nape dark chestnut brown, with a few feathers on the midline of forehead with dusky blackish centres. Lores, chin, throat, sides of head and collar below the nape black. Mantle, back and scapulars dark green. Rump and uppertail coverts lustrous or glistening turquoise blue. Tail black with narrow (1.0–2.6 mm wide) dark blue tips. Lesser upperwing coverts glistening turquoise blue (the feathers with black bases and broad blue tips, forming a conspicuous glistening blue patch on the shoulder), the blue also extending onto the marginal underwing coverts; median and greater coverts dark green. Primaries black with a broad apical white band across all the feathers but restricted to the inner web of the outermost primary (the white narrowest on the outermost primary and

becoming progressively broader on the inner feathers (1–7) and reduced to a dull spot on the outer web of the 8th primary. Secondaries black with outer web broadly edged with green on the outer half of the feather and the green extending across the tip on the innermost feathers; tertials dark green with blackish bases. Breast flanks and sides of belly pale green (paler than back) and tinged with pale blue gloss. Central patch on belly black,

Figure 1. Photograph of Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida cucullata* A37111 showing details of upper and underparts.

some feathers tipped with bright red; lower belly and undertail coverts bright red. Underwing coverts and axillaries black. Undertail black. See Figure 1.

DISTRIBUTION, GEOGRAPHIC VARIATION, STATUS AND MIGRATION

The Hooded Pitta is one of the most common and widespread of the pittas ranging from north-east India, south-west China, South East Asia (Myanmar, North Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, south Laos, Cambodia), Philippines, Sulawesi, the Greater Sundas (Sumatra, Borneo and Java) and New Guinea (including the Aru Islands). (See Figure 2). Currently twelve subspecies are recognised, most with restricted distributions and these can be divided into two distinct groups i.e. those from mainland Asia to

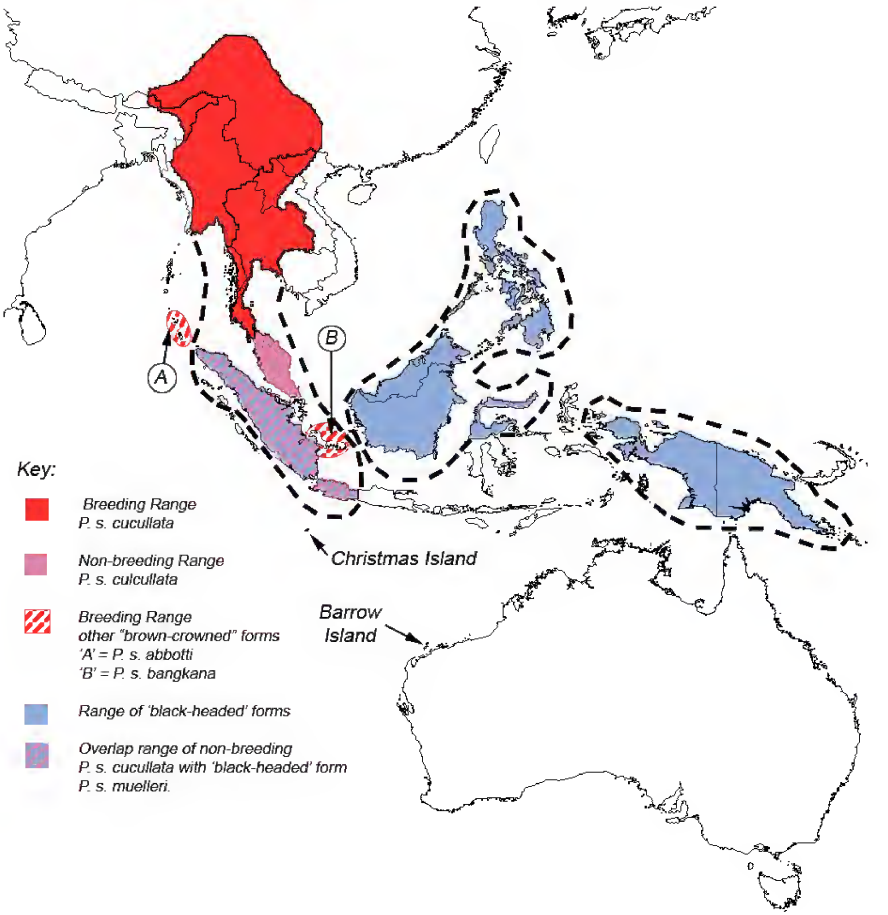

Figure 2. Map showing the distribution of *Pitta sordida* populations.

the Philippines, Borneo and Sulawesi and those to the east in the New Guinea region. Southeast Asian and Philippine populations are paler green than those from the New Guinea region, have a bluish wash on the belly and or flanks and have more orange tones on the lower belly and undertail coverts. In addition the New Guinea or eastern populations have very little or no white in the wing, whereas all South East Asian populations have large wing patches. The various subspecies can also be divided into those with chestnut on the crown and those with the head entirely black (including the crown). Nine subspecies have entirely black heads and only three have chestnut crowns, *viz. P. s. cucullata, P. s. bangkana* and *P. s. abbotti.*

The subspecies *cucullata* breeds in the Himalayan foothills, north-east India and Bangladesh and south and east to Myanmar, Yunan, Thailand including the peninsula and Indochina. This subspecies is large, long winged (wing 108–119 mm, weight 57–71g), has a rich chestnut-brown crown and nape and has more extensive red on the belly than the nominate subspecies. Part of the population of this, the northernmost subspecies is migratory, with birds moving south to peninsular Thailand, Malaysia, Sumatra and west Java during the northern winter. Migrants of *P. s. cucullata* have regularly been recorded on islands in the Malacca Straits and on islands off west Sumatra including Nias.

The subspecies *P. s. bangkana* from Banka and Belitung (Billiton) islands off south-east Sumatra, is sedentary, has a smaller wing (100–105 mm) and has a variable amount of chestnut brown on the crown.

The subspecies *P. s. abbotti* occurs on the Nicobar Islands, is also sedentary, and is similar to *cucullata* but is shorter winged (wing 105–109 mm), has a reduced blue patch on the rump and uppertail coverts (the rump patch of *cucullata* is twice as large) and the white primary patch is narrow and confined to 6 feathers.

Based on coloration and size, especially wing size, the Barrow Island specimen is a *P. s. cucullata.* Some northern populations of this subspecies undergo long-distance migration south to the Malaysian Peninsular, Sumatra and occasionally further south. Passage migrants and winter visitors of *cucullata* have been recorded on the Malaysian Peninsula (in mainly western areas).There are also numerous reports of night-time collisions at lights on land south to Singapore. In the Malay Peninsula the main autumn influx (based on netting observations) is from 15 October to 22 December, with passage migrant intensity low through October and much heavier in November and December. Judging from isolated captures at

Fraser's Hill during late January and early February and even one found on 10 March, small numbers obviously continue to move within and south through the Malay Peninsula in mid-winter. The return spring migration back to the breeding quarters occurs in April–May.

At Fraser's Hill (Malaysia) during 1966–69 a total of 974 night-flying migrants were netted from 15 October to 22 December and from 7 April to 8 May during the migration period (Medway and Wells 1976). Passage migrants or wintering birds have also been collected on small islands in the Malacca Straits. This implies that migrants move south through the Malaysian Peninsula on a broad front and are undeterred by some fairly large sea crossings.

Also of interest is the fact that autumn migrants netted at Fraser's Hill tended to weigh less than birds already in their winter quarters in November. A total of 353 intercepted night migrants captured in October–December weighed 47.3–75.4g; 23 daytime captures south of the breeding range weighed 60.0–73.5g, December to January 50.0–63.0g; February 62.5–66.5g, March 64.5–69.5g, April 80.4g and May 60.0–64.0g .The April 80.4g is possibly an extreme departure weight.

The Barrow Island bird weighed only 35g, had a bony keel, no subcutaneous or body fat, and at about half the weight of many migrants was positively emaciated. It would no-doubt also have had a great deal of trouble trying to forage and feed on Barrow Island after burning up all of its reserves.

HABITAT, FOOD AND CALL

The Hooded Pitta occurs in a wide range of habitats including primary riverine forests, secondary forests, scrubs, swamps, overgrown plantations, orchards, gardens, mangroves and sago swamps. Although usually in very open habitats during migration it generally favours more or less closed canopy forest. It also occupies a wide altitudinal zone from sea level to c. 2,000m (in India). They feed mainly on insects especially ants, beetles, termites, cockroaches and bugs, also earthworms and snails and generally forage on the forest floor probing the leaf litter. The call of *cucullata* is described as a loud fluty double whistle 'whew-whew' or 'raew-raew' and a harsh 'skyew' alarm or contact call. Wintering birds apparently call mainly at dusk and dawn.

WEATHER

Between 10 and 16 December 2009 cyclonic storm Ward formed off Sri Lanka in the Bay of Bengal, then tracked south-west. It had a major influence on the region with strong winds and heavy rain extending from southern India to western Sumatra.

The major weather events for north Western Australia in December 2009 and January 2010

were tropical cyclones Laurence and Magda. Severe tropical cyclone Laurence developed in the Arafura Sea on 8 December, moved southwest passing over Darwin on 12 December. It then skirted the Kimberley coast reaching category 5 intensity before crossing the coast east of Koolan Island. It then re-crossed the coast, tracked west, and steadily intensified before turning southeast towards the east Pilbara coast which it eventually crossed near Wallal on the 80 Mile Beach (on 21 December) as a category 5 cyclone.

On the 18 January 2010 tropical low Magda formed close to the Indonesian island of Roti (southwest of Timor) and moved southwest reaching cyclone intensity on 20 January. By 21 January it was close to Browse Island and it crossed the Kimberley coast at Kuri Bay, on 22 January and quickly weakened overland.

CONCLUSION

Judging from satellite imagery it is possible that one or all of these extreme weather events could have played a part in driving the Barrow Island bird so far south. Cyclones often drive migratory birds well off course and far beyond normal range limits. They are also known to entrap birds in the eye of the cyclone and carry them not only across seas but far inland and this has led to a number of Asian species reaching the Pilbara and sometimes well inland in Western Australia.

This record also highlights the value of specimens in gaining information on these Asian migrants including details of sex, age, condition, morphology and thus their region of origin.

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Cannibalism in Fence Skinks – While tending to our garden in our backyard in North Perth on the morning of 24 February 2013, I noticed some activity by an adult Fence Skink, *Cryptoblepharus buchananii*, amongst some litter that had collected in a corner. This individual was approximately 9 cm long from tail tip to snout. On closer inspection, the adult skink was chewing on a juvenile of the same species. Once the juvenile had stopped moving, the adult grabbed the juvenile at mid body and began to chew along the length of the juvenile while moving towards its head. On having the head of the juvenile in its mouth it began to swallow it. The whole process took less than a minute.

Our backyard is paved and has stone work features with a mixture of low vegetation (mainly herbs and vegetables). I estimate a population of about 8–10 *C. buchananii* for the section of the back yard I was working. I have observed juvenile *C. buchananii* on numerous occasions and always wondered if they all radiated out once they reached adult stage or took over territories of other individuals that have died. I can now add the observation that young also form part of the adult's diet.

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Observations on birds drinking at a Pilbara waterhole – On 27 February 2012 we were a few kilometres from Roebourne, wandering along a deeply eroded dry wash, following a scattered line of small eucalypts. We had noticed the numbers of small birds were increasing and eventually we came across a very shallow small pool (see Figure 1). The surrounding arid flat had a patchy covering of spinifex heavily in seed and shrubs to 4m in height. The country was in excellent condition with plenty of spinifex seed on the ground. Roebourne had recorded 210mm rainfall in January but only 1mm in February, so surface water was rapidly diminishing.

A short period of observation soon established that many birds were drinking there, so we commenced photographing from a camouflaged hide. Four sessions of observation totalling 9 hours took place. During this time we added 30/40 litres of water each visit to prolong its duration. Though the pool was very small, we estimate that in excess of 5000 visits took place in a 24 hour period. Birds were cautious in their approach and most bathed as well as drank.

Figure 1. The waterhole.

Figure 2. Buff-banded Rail.

Visiting species were:

Brown Quail. Up to 3 adult birds came each time, usually as a close pair and a few each session.

Diamond Dove. Small groups would sit on nearby perches with 1 to 3 birds going down to the pool at regular intervals.

Spinifex Pigeon. Small groups would come close to the pool, but a maximum of 2 would drink at anytime.

Crested Pigeon. There were odd single birds.

Buff-banded Rail. A single bird at regular intervals was a surprising observation in this habitat (see Figure 2).

Black-fronted Dotterel. A single bird fed around the pool most of the time.

Spotted Harrier. A single bird flew over twice at 9m causing much anxiety.

Galah. Small flocks came on a regular basis with a maximum of 17 birds, but only a few would drink together.

Cockatiel. They were most anxious in their approach with flocks of up to 25 perching on tops of nearby trees, with only a few going to the pool together.

Budgerigar. There were flocks of 30/40 in the vicinity and perching on trees close to pool. They were reluctant to be the first and only 2 or 3 drinking together.

Sacred Kingfisher. A single bird perched close to water.

Rainbow bee-eater. A single bird perched close to pool and swooped for insects.

Magpie-lark. One male bird had several visits and spent a considerable amount of time successfully hunting small fish and flying away with a beak full.

Brown Songlark. A single bird on a few occasions.

Rufous Songlark. A single bird made 3 visits, which were mostly spent sitting in the water bathing.

Horsefield's Bushlark. Regular visits by up to 3 birds.

Brown Honeyeater. A maximum of 3 birds at one time. Usually 1 or 2 with the latter being a pair.

White-plumed Honeyeater. A pair came at evening time, both days.

Singing Honeyeater. 1 or 2 birds on a few occasions, both days.

Zebra Finch. Flocks of up to 50 in vicinity with a steady stream visiting the pool. They appeared to enjoy bathing immensely with some birds floating on top of water on their side doing barrel rolls.

Star Finch. One pair on the first day.

Painted Finch. Usually came in pairs which drank close together, or sometimes just the odd single bird. A daily total of about 20.

Figure 3. Pictorella Mannikin.

Pictorella Mannikin. Three birds came to the pool infrequently, with two behaving as a breeding pair. They not only came to drink, but searched under the wet dead leaves in the sloppy mud close to the waters edge gathering some form of grubs. According to Johnstone *et al.* (2013) the status of this species in the Pilbara is uncertain and it is probably only a rare visitor from the Kimberley; the three previously published records from the Pilbara are all since 1995 (see Figure 3).

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